Nick Land, Shoot-out at the Cyber Corral

High Noon on the Electronic Frontier: Conceptual Issues in Cyberspace edited by Peter Ludlow, MIT Press, ISBN 0 262 62103 7

CONTROL is the big one for everyone involved with the Internet culture. The potential for dullness is obvious: reading about rights to privacy versus unqualified freedom is well-trodden territory. Enter Peter Ludlow and his High Noon on the Electronic Frontier who manages the clever trick of collecting representative opinions about public policy and fascinating cultural comment on that place where computer-mediated communications became hopelessly entangled with settler mythology of the American West. Here we are in Big John Barlow country—cofounder with Mitch Kapor of the Electronic Frontier Foundation which aims to guarantee freedom from government control and interference on the Internet. And, this being America, the concepts are predominantly legal, the issues litigation driven.

To set the stage for this showdown at Digital Gulch, Ludlow has collected 33 articles by writers ranging from antisocial hackers to rigid security-types. Apart from American nationality and involvement in computer-mediated communication, the selection criteria for inclusion in this volume seem to be based on a capability and willingness to address a general audience in nontechnical terms, and an (ultimately futile) aspiration to achieve "balanced" debate. The editor has overcome the formidable organisational problem this posed by grouping the texts into five thematic blocks, corresponding roughly to the categories of property, territory, privacy, censorship and personal identity.

Despite Ludlow's strenuously attempted neutrality, it is obvious that the white hat in this compilation belongs firmly on the head of Barlow. Barlow seems a friendly kind of guy: on the one hand taking hackers out to dinner, where he discovers they're nice kids really (even after seeing his financial records spool down the screen the night before); and on the other, becoming bemused and disappointed at the incompetence of government.

Finding a suitable opponent for Barlow must have seemed an awesome challenge, and it is here that Ludlow really scores—with the dramatic entry of Dorothy Denning, fresh out of the Georgetown University spook-farm, and itching for a declaration of martial law.

In contrast to Barlow, Denning strongly distrusts all tendencies to decentralisation in communication systems, and propounds a model of the future requiring something akin to the incorporation of the telecommunications infrastructure into the US National Security Agency .

Such is the divergence of opinion between Barlow and Denning that it is inevitable that the showdown between the two—presented as a debate in chapter 15—will cast everything else into shadow, if only because it reveals the true antagonism at issue between the info-business lobby and the security state. Appropriately situated at the vortex of the Barlow-Denning confrontation, the overwhelmingly critical issue is the Clipper encryption chip, and the fate of cryptosystems.

The cultural importance of cryptography is difficult to overemphasise. It is the sole truly numerical research program outside number theory, and an exception to the predominant tendency to reduce number to quantity. More concretely, it provides the capability to realise privacy, proprietary control, virtual territory or sheer survival where the state is no longer in a position to back up the corresponding "rights".

A vital development is the revolutionary transformation of the cryptographic landscape induced by Whitfield Diffie and Martin Hellman's public-key encryption (PKE) system. Prior to PKE all cryptosystems conformed to two basic types: collaborative systems involving prior arrangement between parties, or intermediary systems secured by a single neutral encrypting-decrypting agency. The Clipper chip, backed by the NSA, is an example of the second type: a trusted third party (such as the secret services) acts as general guarantor of communications security. But, the "abstract machine" realised by PKE exhibits extraordinary plasticity, and is grossly underestimated when it is annexed to issues of communicative privacy as a technical remedy.

Nick Land is a philosopher at the University of Warwick.

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